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Newly-discovered Guatemalan police records fill dozens of rooms in five buildings on an active police compound in Zone 6, downtown Guatemala City. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

The Guatemalan Police Archives

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**"Mildewed Police Files
May Hold Clues to
Atrocities in
Guatemala"**
by Ginger Thompson
New York Times
November 21, 2005

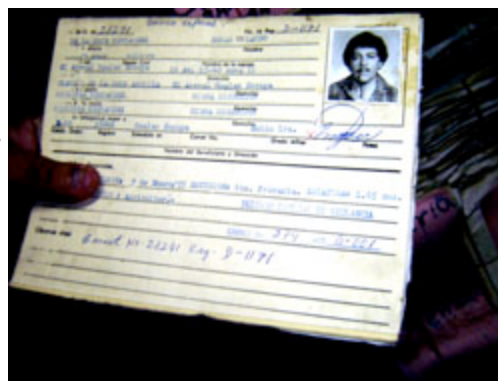
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**Dear Mr. President:
Lessons on Justice**

Washington, D.C.,
November 21, 2005 - On
July 5, officials from the
Guatemalan government's
human rights office (PDH
- *Procuraduría de
Derechos Humanos*)
entered a deteriorating,
rat-infested munitions
depot in downtown
Guatemala City to
investigate complaints
about improperly-stored explosives. During inspection of the site,
investigators found a vast collection of documents, stored in five
buildings and in an advanced state of decay. The files belonged to
the National Police, the central branch of Guatemala's security
forces during the war - an entity so inextricably linked to violent
repression, abduction, disappearances, torture and assassination
that the country's 1996 peace accord mandated it be completely



Detailed personnel files for police informants are part of these abandoned records.

from Guatemala

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The Guatemala 1954 Documents

disbanded and a new police institution created in its stead.

The scope of this find is staggering - PDH officials estimate that there are 4.5 kilometers - some *75 million pages* - of materials. During a visit to the site in early August, I saw file cabinets marked "assassinations," "disappeared" and "homicides," as well as folders labeled with the names of internationally-known victims of political murder, such as anthropologist Myrna Mack (killed by security forces in 1990).

There were hundreds of rolls of still photography, which the PDH is developing now. There were pictures of bodies and of detainees, there were lists of police informants with names and photos, there were vehicle license plates, video tapes and computer disks. The installations themselves, which are in a terrible state of neglect - humid and exposed to the open air, infested with vermin and full of trash - contain what appear to be clandestine cells.

The importance of the discovery cannot be overstated. Since 1996, when the government signed a peace accord with guerrilla forces, Guatemalans have fought to recover historical memory, end impunity and institute the rule of law after more than 30 years of violent civil conflict. In 1997, a UN-sponsored truth commission was created to investigate the war and analyze its origins.

Despite a mandate granting it the right to request records from all parties to the conflict, the Historical Clarification Commission was stonewalled at every turn by military, intelligence and security officials, who refused to turn over internal files on the grounds that they had been destroyed during the war, or simply did not exist. The truth commission released its final report in 1999 without the benefit of access to such critical material. According to the report, some 150,000 Guatemalan citizens died in the war, and another 40,000 were abducted and disappeared.

Despite this terrible legacy, Guatemala represents today an extraordinary example of how information can advance the cause of justice over the barriers of impunity. Guatemalan investigators have drawn on victims' accounts, forensic records, published human rights reports, perpetrators' testimonies and thousands of declassified U.S. documents obtained by the National Security Archive under the Freedom of Information Act in an attempt to

provide some historical and judicial accountability for what happened during the war. Openness advocates have used the government's silence about the war to press their case for the passage of a national freedom of information law. Prosecutors have incorporated U.S. declassified documents into legal battles targeting military and police abusers in key human rights cases. And now Guatemalans are discovering their own buried, hidden, and abandoned records from the files of the repressive Guatemalan security services.

The newly discovered police archives, which cover a century of police operations, promises to be one of the most revealing collections of military or police records ever discovered in Latin America. The appearance of these documents has created an extraordinary opportunity for preserving history and advancing justice that the Archive is mobilizing to meet.

With support from the Fund for Constitutional Government and the Open Society Institute, the Archive sent international experts to examine the files and provide assessments for their recovery and management. Trudy Huskamp Peterson, a leading U.S. archivist, spent a week in Guatemala in September, and delivered a report two weeks later that will serve as an invaluable guide once an institution is designated to begin cleaning and ordering the documents.

In October, the Archive's Carlos Osorio accompanied two senior members of the "Memory Commission" ("*Comisión por la Memoria*") from La Plata, Argentina, to Guatemala - Ana Cacopardo, the director, and her chief archivist Ingrid Jaschek. The commission is a coalition of government and civil society groups dedicated to the study of Argentina's dirty war, which also oversees millions of police intelligence files. They examined the Guatemalan archives and met with government officials and NGOs to discuss some of the political and legal challenges inherent in designing long-term custody and control of the documents.

Once the authority to manage the files is established, the most urgent need will be for expert technical assistance to carry out the monumental task of ordering, cleaning, scanning, and databasing the files, with the goal of providing at least limited public access as soon as possible. Such assistance will be invaluable over the long run to those most likely to consult the material: lawyers,

journalists, historians, human rights groups and the families of the disappeared.

The Archive will dedicate itself in the coming months to supporting this unprecedented rescue, recovery and restoration operation. This historical salvage mission is intended to secure these records of repression, restore them to readable form, and organize them into what promises to be the largest and most revealing collection of 'dirty war' documentation ever unearthed in Latin America.

Excerpt from a report written by Trudy Huskamp Peterson, a leading archivist and consultant for the National Security Archive on the Guatemalan Police Files. The report, "Records of the *Policía Nacional de Guatemala*: Report and Recommendations," was translated into Spanish and delivered to several different Guatemalan organizations in early November.

Photos

Photo 1: Newly-discovered Guatemalan police records fill dozens of rooms in five buildings on an active police compound in Zone 6, downtown Guatemala City.

Photo 2: The archives contain an estimated 4.5 kilometers - or 75 million pages - of paper.

Photo 3: For years, the documents have been stored haphazardly in and on top of file cabinets or stacked in towering piles, under open windows, in hallways, and in huge trash heaps inside rat-infested buildings.

Photo 4: Many records show advanced signs of decay; some of them are seriously contaminated with mold and either are wet or have been wet in the past. There are documents that have been partially burned or charred; others are simply disintegrating with age and neglect.

Photo 5: The Archive's Guatemala Project Director Kate Doyle visited the police archives in August and again in September. The buildings in which the documents are kept are so deteriorated from the presence of trash, vermin and mold, that employees working with the records risk serious health hazards.

Photo 6: Sifting through records on the police compound

during a visit in October, Archive analyst Carlos Osorio finds a reminder of the historical ties between Guatemala and the United States.

Photo 7: Files are crudely labeled by case type and year. There are whole file cabinets marked "assassinations," "disappeared" and "homicides."

Photo 8: Documents include internal reports, criminal records, promotion lists, surveillance reports, and fingerprint files, among many others.

Photo 9: There are thousands of photographs of the living and the dead.

Photo 10: Dozens of logbooks and ledgers have been found, containing the names and photos of countless detainees. This one is dated July 24, 1967.

Photo 11: Detailed personnel files for police informants are part of these abandoned records. This man participated in a "Servicio especial de vigilancia" ("Special surveillance service")

Photo 12: Although it will take time before the first set of documents can be opened for public access, the files will provide families of the disappeared a wealth of new evidence about the Guatemalan government's operations during the conflict.

Photo 13: International experts in the field of archives recovery, preservation and public access have visited the Guatemalan archives to assist in the salvaging of this massive cache of records.

Photo 14: The office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos-PDH), which discovered the site, has taken many important steps to protect the archive and begin the recovery of records.

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Photo 1: Newly-discovered Guatemalan police records fill dozens of rooms in five buildings on an active police compound in Zone 6, downtown Guatemala City. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

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Photo 2 : The archives contain an estimated 4.5 kilometers - or 75 million pages - of paper.

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Photo 3: For years, the documents have been stored haphazardly in and on top of file cabinets or stacked in towering piles, under open windows, in hallways, and in huge trash heaps inside rat-infested buildings. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

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Photo 4: Many records show advanced signs of decay; some of them are seriously contaminated with mold and either are wet or have been wet in the past. There are documents that have been partially burned or charred; others are simply disintegrating with age and neglect.

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Photo 5: The Archive's Guatemala Project Director Kate Doyle visited the police archives in August and again in September. The buildings in which the documents are kept are so deteriorated from the presence of trash, vermin and mold, that employees working with the records risk serious health hazards.

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Photo 6: Sifting through records on the police compound during a visit in October, Archive analyst Carlos Osorio finds a reminder of the historical ties between Guatemala and the United States. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

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Photo 7: Files are crudely labeled by case type and year. There are whole file cabinets marked "assassinations," "disappeared" and "homicides."

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Photo 8: Documents include internal reports, criminal records, promotion lists, surveillance reports, and fingerprint files, among many others.

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Photo 9: There are thousands of photographs of the living and the dead. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

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Photo 10: Dozens of logbooks and ledgers have been found, containing the names and photos of countless detainees. This one is dated July 24, 1967.

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Photo 12: Although it will take time before the first set of documents can be opened for public access, the files will provide families of the disappeared a wealth of new evidence about the Guatemalan government's operations during the conflict.

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Photo 13: International experts in the field of archives recovery, preservation and public access have visited the Guatemalan archives to assist in the salvaging of this massive cache of records. (Photo - © Daniel Hernández-Salazar)

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Photo 14: The office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos-PDH), which discovered the site, has taken many important steps to protect the archive and begin the recovery of records.

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